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Judging Sexual Orientation from Still Faces

Psychology

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Faculty Sponsor(s): Peterson, Eric

A burgeoning literature demonstrates that individuals can judge personality and group membership (e.g., religious and political affiliation) from still faces with some degree of accuracy. Recent studies demonstrate that individuals perceive sexual orientation better-than-chance from surprisingly impoverished facial stimuli. This effect remains even when the stimuli consist of only the eye region (i.e., cut out from the face) and are presented at just 50 milliseconds. To date, researchers have explored possible physiological markers (i.e., increased pupillary dilation) that may convey information about orientation. However, it remains unclear what aspects of the facial stimuli the perceiver utilizes to form a judgment. An important limitation of past studies concerns the creation of stimuli. Researchers have obtained pictures (i.e., faces of gay and straight individuals) from online dating websites. In the present study, we are recruiting volunteers who confidentially self-report sexual orientation information and allow us to take a face pic. After grouping our stimuli by sexual orientation, we will use morphing technology to create composite stimuli representing each group. The composites will provide a more robust means of exploring two feasible hypotheses: 1) the faces or eyes of individuals of homosexual orientation differ in a systematic way (e.g., pupillary dilation), or 2) individuals of homosexual orientation may display facial characteristics that are more likely to diverge from an “average” face in a non-systematic way. In the first scenario, any discerning featural traits should intensify in the composite faces. In the second scenario, sexual orientation discrimination should dissipate in the morphing process. We believe our results will inform our understanding of the social cognitive mechanisms that support a person’s ability to make orientation judgments based on minimal information. Further, we may gain some insights that direct future research in the development of sexual orientation.